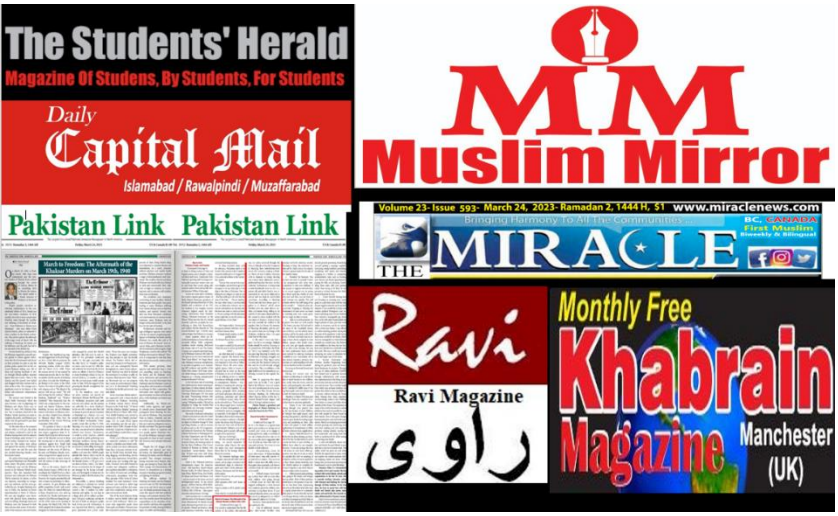
March to Freedom: The Aftermath of the Khaksar Murders on March 19th, 1940

By Nasim Yousaf

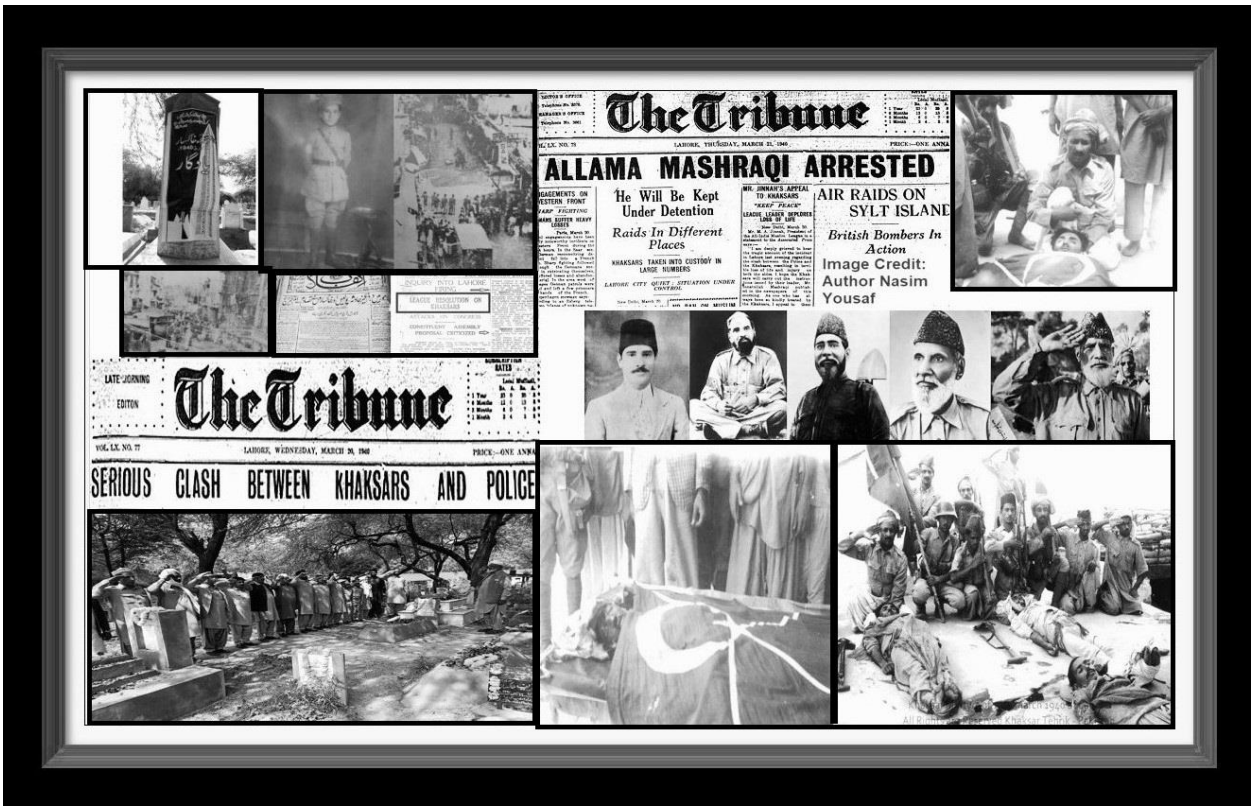
On March 19, 1940, a Khaksar march with c*hup raast* commenced, and the resolute rhythm of Khaksar boots echoed through the streets of Lahore, driven by an unyielding drive to liberate the nation. This march ended in a brutal massacre of Khaksars at the hands of the police. Despite popular narratives attributing independence to the constitutional efforts of M.A. Jinnah and the non-violent resistance of M.K Gandhi, the truth is more complicated. Freedom came through the sacrifice and suffering of thousands of Khaksars - from Peshawar to Burma (now Myanmar) - who were either killed, injured, beaten, jailed, or subjected to other cruelties by the British authorities. This article explores the aftermath of the tragic event of March 19th, the suffering of Mashriqi, his family, and his followers, and the path that led to the downfall of the British Raj.



On that fateful day of March 19th, the Khaksars organized a peaceful protest parade in Lahore against restrictions that the Government had placed on their activities. In order to stop the protest, police opened fire on the unarmed Khaksars, killing over 200 of them and injuring hundreds of others (though officials publicly reported figures that were lower). Many of the martyrs and the injured were kicked and dragged with their turbans tied to their necks or feet. The carnage was a significant event in the history of the Indian sub-continent's independence movement. The martyrs were buried in the Miani Sahib Graveyard, which has since become a site of pilgrimage for Khaksars and others. Every year on March 19, since 1940, Khaksar Martyrs' Day is solemnly observed by the Khaksar Tehrik. Speeches are made to enlighten the public, and Khaksars and others visit the graveyard to pay their respects to the martyrs.

On the same day as the massacre (March 19th), at 5:45 pm, the police and military conducted a raid on the Khaksar headquarters and the adjacent house of Mashriqi, under Section 17-A of the Indian Criminal Law Amendment Act. The raiders were callous and ignored the sanctity of Mashriqi's abode, where not only his sons, but also purdah-observing females, were ferociously treated. The police fired teargas grenades and injured Mashriqi's son, Ehsanullah Khan Aslam. The police arrested two of Mashriqi's sons and the Khaksars present at the Khaksar Tehrik's headquarters. They also ransacked both premises and confiscated the Khaksar Tehrik's materials. In Lahore, a curfew was imposed, censorship on newspapers was enforced, and the army patrolled the city. At night, Mashriqi, who was in Delhi, was arrested by Senior Superintendent of Police D. Kilburn. His sons and daughters were threatened with physical harm, abduction, and even killing.

Mashriqi's family and Khaksars were also harassed by both state and non-state actors. In the aftermath of the massacre, men and women Khaksars launched a campaign of civil disobedience.


The Tribune
ALLAMA MASHRAQI ARRESTED
He Will Be Kept Under Detention
Raids In Different Places
KHAKSARS TAKEN INTO CUSTODY IN LARGE NUMBERS
AIR RAIDS ON SYLT ISLAND
British Bombers In Action
Image Credit: Author Nasim Yousaf
The Tribune
SERIOUS CLASH BETWEEN KHAKSARS AND POLICE

Despite this heartbreaking tragedy and suggestions by Muslim Leaguers, M.A. Jinnah did not postpone the All-India Muslim League's (AIML) upcoming session, which was scheduled for March 22-24, 1940. When the session started, it was marked by widespread protests due to the Khaksar murder and the arrests of Mashriqi and others. It is said that 100,000 people flocked to the venue of the AIML Session. The voice of the public echoed with slogans such as "The blood of the martyrs will not go waste," "We will take revenge for the martyrs," "Allama Mashriqi Zindabad," and "Khaksar Zindabad." They demanded that the AIML seek compensation for the martyred and injured Khaksars, release Mashriqi, his sons, and the Khaksars, remove restrictions on Khaksar activities, and shun Punjab Prime Minister Sir Sikandar Hayat Khan from the membership of the Central Working Committee of the AIML.

The question at hand is why did Jinnah decide to proceed with the session despite suggestions from Sir Sikandar Hayat Khan and others to postpone it? Sir Sikander wanted to delay the meeting due to the deadly public sentiment against him. People held him responsible for the killing of the Khaksars and the arrest of Mashriqi, his sons, and Khaksars. Jinnah, meanwhile, recognized the tragedy as an opportunity and chose to move forward with the session to take advantage of the situation.

Prior to the session, Jinnah's All India Muslim League (AIML) had no standing in the Punjab Province, where Sir Sikander's Unionist Party held sway. However, the tragedy presented Jinnah

with a chance to undermine Sir Sikander's position. To gain Khaksar and public sympathies, Jinnah took several steps. He visited the injured Khaksars at Mayo Hospital soon after arriving on March 21st. He also had banners in support of the Khaksars hung throughout the AIML venue at the opening of the session. On March 24th, 1940, the AIML adopted the Khaksar Resolution alongside the Pakistan Resolution.

Through these actions, Jinnah not only managed to control the 100,000 attendees, who had come to seek redress for the grievances mentioned earlier, but also gained popularity. On the other hand, Sir Sikander's political career came to an end. After Jinnah achieved his objectives, he did not make any efforts to help the Khaksars or secure Mashriqi's release. In fact, he wanted Mashriqi to remain in jail so that the political arena would remain open for him. With the support of the government, Jinnah strengthened his political position.

In the meantime, soon after his arrest, pressure was exerted on Mashriqi to disband the Khaksar Tehrik. Mashriqi's properties and bank accounts were seized, and his pension was withheld. As a result, Mashriqi's family was left to starve, and they had no money to provide proper treatment to Mashriqi's son (Aslam), who was severely injured from the police raid at the Khaksar headquarters. Consequently, Aslam died on May 31, 1940. Mashriqi, who was still imprisoned at the time, was not allowed to attend his beloved son's funeral. Furthermore, to avoid a public reaction, controls were placed on public gatherings near Mashriqi's residence, leaving Aslam's young siblings alone in the house with no experience in handling the tragedy.
News of Aslam's death spread like wildfire and more than 50,000 people attended Aslam's funeral, which was led in a military style by the Khaksars. After the funeral prayers, a 101-gun salute was fired to honor Aslam. The funeral was considered to be the largest of any teenager in the Indian subcontinent, and the tragedy of Aslam and the Khaksars greatly fueled demand for independence. Meanwhile, in prison, Mashriqi was subjected to physical and mental torture, and derogatory language was hurled at him to weaken his determination and spirits. He was kept in a dingy, dark cell in solitary confinement with poor sanitation, and due to the lack of fresh air and poor-quality food, he became sick. Furthermore, it was reported that Mashriqi had been given poisonous food and/or medicine, which would result in his slow death. When this news was revealed, the Khaksars were highly perturbed, and they decided to seek his forcible release. The Khaksar Tehrik, had already been banned in the Punjab province, was subsequently banned throughout the entire Indian subcontinent. Mashriqi was asked to disband the movement or continue to suffer. In response, Mashriqi wrote back, "Khaksar Movement was not my property that I could do with it whatever I liked, nor can it be discontinued." Mashriqi decided to lay his life and started a fast unto death.

In the meantime, British authorities responded with a heavy-handed crackdown on Khaksars. According to Khaksar veteran Hakim Ahmed Hussain in his Urdu book "19 March 1940 Kay Khaksar Shudha" (meaning Khaksar Martyrs of March 19th, 1940), "over 10,000 Khaksars were shoved in various jails of the [Punjab] province" (page 114). As usual, official figures were misleading and did not state a number above 2,000. Hussain further wrote that "properties of Janbazon, Salars, and Khaksars worth billion rupees were damaged."

While in jail, Khaksars were kept in a miserable condition as well. The colonial authorities used brutal methods to punish and extract information from them. Common methods of torture in British India included whipping, flogging, waterboarding, electric shock, sleep deprivation, forced labor,

sexual abuse, and burning with cigarettes. Prisoners were often housed in crowded and unhygienic conditions, making them vulnerable to infestations by a variety of insects such as bedbugs, cockroaches, mosquitoes, body lice, fleas, and ants. Other forms of torture included “the water treatment,” where prisoners were forced to drink large amounts of water, and then their stomachs were compressed, causing severe pain and sometimes death. One of the most infamous forms of torture used in British India's jails was the “pole technique,” where prisoners were suspended upside down from a pole and beaten. Prisoners were also subjected to psychological torture, such as being kept in isolation for long periods of time, being denied sleep, and subjected to constant threats and intimidation. As a result, prisoners suffered physical and mental health problems. Khaksar prisoners endured a range of aforementioned cruel treatments. The cruelties did not end there; Khaksars were handcuffed and chained in dark and overcrowded dirty cells, with no light or windows in scorching heat, and in extreme cold weather, there were no blankets. The conditions were unsanitary and lacking in basic facilities. Medical treatment and food quality were poor, leading to many Khaksars suffering from various diseases such as diarrhea, malaria, and typhoid. Several even died due from inhumane conditions and cruel treatment. In reaction to this treatment, many Khaksars went on hunger strikes and decided to lay their lives for the sake of freedom.

Furthermore, domestic and foreign intelligence agencies were tasked with the vile mission of gathering intelligence on Mashriqi, his family, and the Khaksars. As a result, files such as “A note on Khaksar Movement” were created in India, and in Bahrain, the British Government's political agent, Hugh Weightman, created a file entitled “The Khaksar Movement in Bahrain.” However, it is important to note that these files did not necessarily contain correct information.

With sinister precision, these agencies and authorities kept a close and unyielding watch on Mashriqi, his family, and the Khaksars' every move, interaction, and association. In India, they recruited informants from Mashriqi's and the Khaksars' circles by luring them with incentives or benefits in exchange for their cooperation. The informants were tasked with gathering information on their activities and plans, while Mashriqi was locked away in prison.

Additionally, the British-controlled media, agencies, and agents of colonial power disseminated false propaganda about Mashriqi, his family, and the Khaksars. They portrayed them as traitors, criminals, and enemies of the state. The idea behind these false and malicious allegations was politically motivated. The agencies sought to create a culture of suspicion and turn people against Mashriqi's family and the Khaksars, making it nearly impossible for them to lead a normal life. However, their attempts ultimately failed.

Despite the evil designs of the authorities and physical and mental torture, the indomitable spirit of Mashriqi, his family, and the Khaksars prevailed. They emerged victorious, having overcome every obstacle, challenge, and attempt to break their will. Their courage and determination will forever be remembered as a shining example of standing up against tyranny and fighting for freedom.

The suffering endured by Mashriqi, his family, and the Khaksars was not in vain. In 1947, the British Raj came to an end, but it came at a great cost. The British partitioned India, a decision that aligned with their political, strategic, and economic interests. However, they smartly placed the

burden of responsibility on the shoulders of Jinnah, Gandhi, and those who supported the partition of India, leaving behind a legacy of conflict and bloodshed.

It is crucial to understand that the liberation of the Indian sub-continent was not solely achieved through the efforts of Jinnah or Gandhi. Compared to Mashriqi, their contributions were minor. For example, creating a Khaksar Tehrik of over 5 million followers with no domestic or foreign funding was a much more substantial accomplishment than what the other two had achieved. Furthermore, it is important to note that Jinnah never set foot in a prison cell, and while Gandhi was incarcerated, he was never subjected to torture and was kept in comfortable conditions. According to Mashriqi, “Blood and rule have always gone together in all history,” which means freedom does not come without sacrifice and means being willing to lay one’s life for the cause. Jinnah and Gandhi cannot be solely credited with the attainment of freedom. To do so would not only discredit the intellect of the populace but also betray the memory of Mashriqi, his family, and the selfless contributions and sufferings of the Khaksars, including those who gave their lives for the cause.

At the end, I would say that a piece like this is not enough. Multiple books should be written focusing on the period from 1930 (when the Khaksar Tehrik was founded) until 1947, documenting Mashriqi, his family, and the Khaksars' sufferings, struggles, and ultimate triumph. Their legacy serves as a reminder that freedom is not given but must be earned through struggle and sacrifice. Their contribution to the fight shall forever be remembered as a defining moment in the region's history.

Note: In preparing this piece, apart from my family, I owe a great deal to the Khaksar men and women who were eyewitnesses to these occurrences, such as Sher Zaman, Ramzan Khokhar, Mushtaq, Ch. Mohammad Ashraf Sandoo (father of the late Lt. General Hamid Javaid), Begum Latif Akhter Siddiqui, and many more.

About the Author: Nasim Yousaf, a grandson and biographer of Allama Mashriqi, is a researcher based in the USA.

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